

"Arizona Daily Star," January 31, 2003. "Net ranks high with users"

"Americans who use the Internet consider it at least as important as newspapers and books, and more important than television, radio and magazines, according to a new survey."

An informed electorate is essential for a successful democracy. Since we can never know whether the electorate is adequately informed, we can only strive for a system most likely to achieve that result. Such a system would maximize news sources. The greater the number of independent editors the system has, the greater the chances of an adequately informed public; the fewer such editors, the worse are such chances.

Over 90% of the American people have indicated (in polls) reliance on TV for most of their news. Past relaxation of limits on media outlet ownership has led to increased ownership concentration, necessarily in the hands of those with sufficient wealth (usually corporations) to ward off unwanted competitors. This has meant fewer independent editors, diminishing chances for a well-informed public. The networks do not do a good job of keeping voters informed, as witness the fact there has been little-to-no network coverage of these hearings to relax ownership restrictions. It is not in network-ownership interest to report such news, possibly arousing public opposition.

If the FCC is concerned with competition, and believes less regulation will produce better entertainment, fine. Separate broadcast use into that for entertainment and that for information. Ending regulation may produce better entertainment, though I doubt it. Competition surely won't produce better news coverage and analysis since competition relies on monetary return and a groundswell of public demand for more news coverage and analysis, creating a boutique niche for great advertising revenue, is unlikely.

News is not entertainment and will not "improve" with competition. Information coverage will grow only with an increased number of editors, independent ones! It will not grow or improve by allowing greater media-ownership concentration.

Why does the Internet not provide the answer? Because of the sheer quantity of information available, and indexing. Journalism performs the indexing function the Internet fails to provide. Journalists select the information to be reported. Individual use of the Internet requires the user to know what she is after. Few can spend all day surfing the net in hopes of finding all the information such user might think she should have. Except for headlines, successful use of the Internet as a source for understanding the day's issues presupposes prior knowledge of what we expect journalists to provide. It is precisely the role of journalism to screen available news and views in order to report the "essential." Once again we see that the number of such screeners is of the greatest importance in determining whether essential information is likely to be getting out. The greater number of such independent editor-screeners, the better the chances the essential will get out; the fewer such editors, the poorer such chances.

Unless the FCC is willing to separate use of the broadcast spectrum into two functions, an entertainment-supplying one and an information-supplying one, limitations on media and broadcast outlet ownership should be tightened, not loosened.